



Helen Keller 1880-  
1968



Ivy Green, where Helen was born

Helen Keller was born in a small town called Tuscumbia, Alabama, on an estate called Ivy Green. Her birthday was June 27, 1880, and her parents were Kate Adams Keller and Colonel Arthur Keller. Theirs was a house full of words; Helen's dad was the editor of the local paper, *The North Alabamian*. But silence fell on this house in February 1882 when 19-month-old Helen became extremely ill and lost her ability to hear and see.

## Mamma Keller



Helen's mother, Kate  
Adams Keller, 1900

Learning was tough for Helen. Because of her deafness and blindness, no one could get through to her, and she could not communicate with others. Basic rules and lessons made no sense to her, and she was called a "[wild child](#)." Then, in 1886, her mom heard about the Perkins School for the Blind in Boston from Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone. Helen reminded Bell of another girl named Laura Bridgman, who was deaf and blind. Kate wrote to the head of the Perkins School to ask for a teacher for Helen and they sent their star student, Anne Sullivan. The day she arrived—March 3, 1887—Helen's life changed.



Portrait of Anne  
Sullivan, 1887

Anne Sullivan was born on April 14, 1866, in Agawam, Massachusetts. Her family had very little money and could not take care of her. When she was 10 years old she was sent to live in a home for poor people. Anne also had very poor vision. At the age of 14, she was sent to the Perkins School for the Blind to receive training to be a teacher for children who were blind.





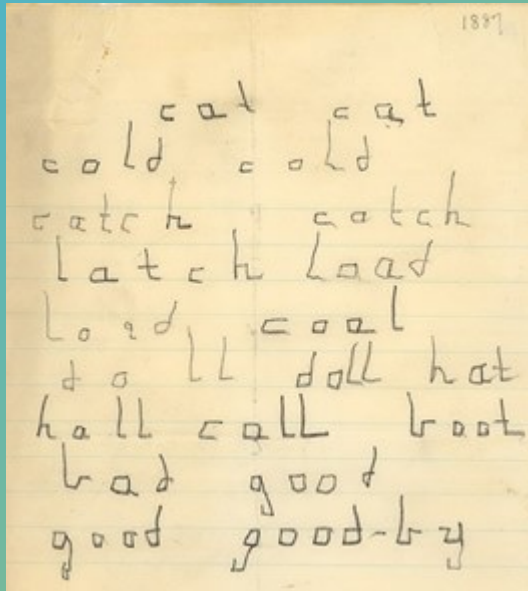
Helen touching the  
branch of a tree

But Helen had spent most of her childhood outside! Anne had taught Helen many things outside of the classroom. She taught her to touch, smell, and experience nature. She wanted Helen to be curious, ask questions, and to discover the world around her. And, for the rest of her life, Helen loved to smell and touch flowers, to feel the wind on her face...she was curious about everything!



Anne had to figure out a way to make Helen understand words and their meaning. She began to teach Helen letters, by signing them into her palm. Then just one month later, everything clicked. Anne held Helen's hand under a pump while signing W-A-T-E-R into her palm. Helen's whole face lit up. The word came to life, in one moment. That day, she learned 30 words.

The water pump  
where Helen made  
her miraculous  
breakthrough



Now Helen was too busy to be wild, and her brainpower shone through. Quickly, she learned words and then sentences. Soon she was able to communicate by signing the manual alphabet. But Helen wasn't satisfied with signing alone. She wanted to learn to write. In addition to learning to write in braille, Helen placed a ruler on the page as a guide and drew very square block letters.

Helen's early writing



Photograph of the  
Boy's Kindergarten  
class at the Perkins  
School for the Blind,  
c. 1880

In 1888, Helen left home for the first time. She and Anne attended the Perkins School for the Blind as a guest of the director, Michael Anagnos. Helen became an overnight celebrity. However, her friendship with Anagnos suffered when she was accused of plagiarism (which means copying someone else's writing and calling it your own). Helen had written a story entitled "The Frost King" for Anagnos's birthday. It was a lot like a story Helen had heard once, long before, and perhaps she remembered parts of it without realizing it. Some people said Helen's writing was just too good for someone who couldn't see or hear nature with her own eyes and ears.





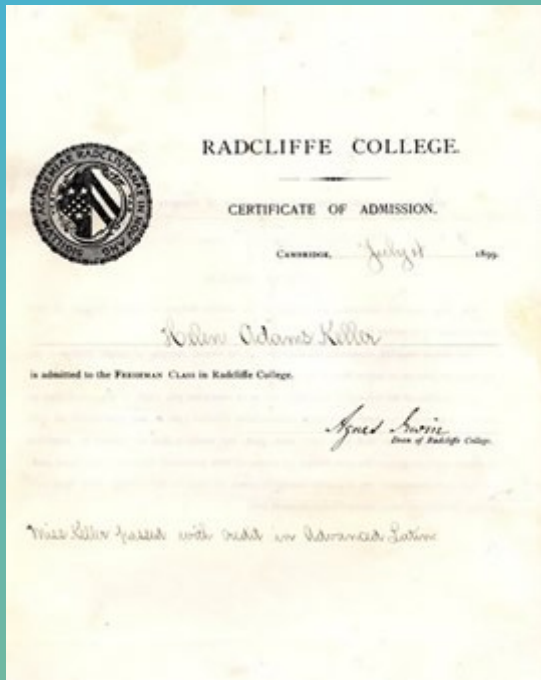
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Helen touching the branch of a  
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Wright-Humason School class picture, 1895 - Helen and Anne are seated at front-left

When Helen was 13, Helen and Anne moved to New York City. There Helen attended the Wright-Humason school for the deaf. She was the only student who was deaf and blind. In class, Anne read everything and signed what she read into Helen's hand. Helen devoured information and became able to communicate with other adults and children. She was even learning how to speak.



In 1896, Helen went to the Cambridge School for Young Ladies, run by Arthur Gilman. Attending his school helped Helen prepare for her college entrance examinations. She was admitted to Radcliffe College in 1899. Radcliffe was the sister college to Harvard University, which at the time did not allow women to attend.

Helen's certificate of  
admission to  
Radcliffe College,  
1899



Anne Sullivan (Helen always called her "Teacher") was very dedicated to Helen. And Helen loved to learn about everything. She studied French, German, and Latin. She learned to play chess and to horseback ride. Since many books were not available in braille at that time, Anne would sign what she read into Helen's hand

Helen and Anne playing  
chess, 1900





Helen met a lot of famous people, including Mark Twain, the author of *Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Twain was great friends with Helen, and he signed his letters to Helen with his real name, Samuel L. Clemens.

Helen Keller, Anne  
Sullivan, Mark  
Twain, and  
Laurence Hutton,  
circa 1902



Helen was also good friends with Alexander Graham Bell, who invented the telephone. Bell was very interested in education for the hearing impaired, in part because his wife Mabel was deaf. In 1888 Bell founded the Volta Bureau for the Deaf, which is now called the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf. Bell was a good friend of Helen and Anne's and would remain so until his death in 1922. In this picture, he is talking to Helen using the manual alphabet.

Helen, Anne, and Alexander  
Graham Bell, 1901



Helen sitting on a stone wall reading braille, 1902

In 1902, a year before her graduation, Helen successfully published her first book, *The Story of My Life*. John Macy, an editor and instructor at Harvard University, edited the book, and Helen dedicated it to Alexander Graham Bell, who had helped so much with her education. The book received great reviews, including one from Mark Twain. (In a [letter to Helen](#), Twain also referred to the plagiarism scandal that took place 12 years before.) Since the book was first published, it has been translated into 50 languages!



Helen was amazing! Her actions led the way for so many women, as well as people with disabilities. In 1904, she was the first deaf-blind person to receive a college degree. She graduated from Radcliffe College cum laude, which means with very high honors

Helen with her Boston Terrier, reading a braille book, 1904





Anne Sullivan explains how Helen learned to speak

Did you know Helen wrote and gave speeches? The video clip here shows how Anne places Helen's hand on her lips, throat, and nose to help Helen feel the sounds that Anne is making.

Helen was also a gifted writer. She wrote fourteen books, many essays, articles and speeches on everything from her love of animals and nature to the importance of equal opportunities for women. She also wrote about the ideas of Swedenborg, a Swedish scientist and philosopher (1688-1772) who believed that by helping others, you grow and help yourself.



Helen and her friends were very interested in political ideas. In 1909, Helen joined the suffragist movement. Suffragists wanted equal treatment for women, including the right to vote—which was granted in 1920. In the same year, she also became a socialist. Helen believed that society should be based on people's needs, not on their power or money. Over the years, Helen would be criticized for her political opinions.

Helen, Anne, and Anne's husband, John Macy at their home in Wrentham



Polly Thomson, Anne Sullivan, Helen Keller, and Charlie Chaplin, 1918

In 1914, Polly Thomson began working for Helen and Anne—they were known as "the three musketeers." In 1918 they traveled to Hollywood to make the movie Deliverance, a silent movie about Helen's life. In the film, Helen and Anne starred as themselves. Plus Helen met movie stars like Charlie Chaplin.

This clip from the movie shows Helen Keller flying in an old biplane



All sorts of people wanted to meet Helen, including Henry Ford, the man who invented the Model-T Ford automobile, one of the most popular cars in the world at that time. Helen also met three generations of the Rockefeller family, who formed the Standard Oil Company. The Rockefellers donated a fortune to the arts, culture, science, politics, and national parks.

Photograph of Helen, Anne  
and Henry Ford, 1920





Helen's acting career continued on the vaudeville stage. She went on tour with Anne, giving lectures and performing in shows that featured drama, comedy, and music. Helen enjoyed the glamorous lifestyle, unlike Anne. Eventually the performances became too tiring for Anne and they stopped their tour in 1922.

Helen in her vaudeville  
dressing room, 1920



Helen was continually drawn to the cause of the underdog. As a pacifist, she protested against the First World War and was one of the early members of the American Civil Liberties Union. In the early 1930s, as America was dealing with the Depression, Helen got on the radio in New York to discuss the needs and rights of the unemployed and the poor.

Helen Keller with a  
wounded soldier, 1919



In 1924, Helen joined the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), the country's leading advocate for people who are blind or visually impaired. For the next 44 years, she was an ambassador for AFB. She toured the United States, developing support for programs that help blind people.

In the video here, Helen tests a device that will help people who are deaf and blind communicate with those who can see and hear. Helen is at the AFB headquarters in New York City. She sits between M. Robert Barnett, AFB's executive director, and Polly Thomson, her companion.

Helen at AFB, testing a communication device for the deaf-blind, around 1950



In 1932, Helen and two leaders from the American Foundation for the Blind—M. C. Migel and Robert B. Irwin—persuaded the U.S. government to hold an international conference of workers for the blind. Thirty-two countries sent their representatives to Washington, D.C., for a special meeting at the White House. Not only did President Herbert Hoover greet the delegates, so did Helen! She held a reception for them and attended all of the meetings.

Helen Keller, President Herbert Hoover, and international delegates outside the White House, 1932





Helen with a little girl listening  
to the radio, 1938

Helen also convinced a major radio manufacturer to donate 250 radios to people who were blind or visually impaired. This was part of a 1929 AFB campaign that distributed over 3,750 radios.

Did you know that "Talking Books" were the very first audio versions of books? They were developed at AFB in 1932. People who are blind can still get them for free from the Library of Congress. In 1935, Helen went to a Senate hearing in Washington, D.C., to make sure that government funds were put aside for this and other programs. Even though Helen couldn't hear, she knew that sound could help educate other people.



Helen was an excellent typist. She typed nearly all of her own letters on both a braille writer and a regular typewriter. The braille writer works a little bit like a typewriter. It has six keys, one for each dot in a braille cell.

Helen wrote hundreds of articles and published [many books](#). Her writings came to the world's attention in May 1933 when one of her books, *Out of the Dark*, was burned by young Nazis in Germany who hated socialism. Helen wrote an impassioned [letter in response to the book-burning](#)

Helen at the typewriter,  
Polly Thomson standing  
beside her, 1933



In 1936, Helen's beloved teacher Anne Sullivan died. Polly Thomson now became Helen's primary companion, and a whole new chapter of her life was beginning

Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan Macy, 1924



During World War II, Helen and Polly went all over the United States giving support to blind and wounded veterans. Everywhere Helen went, barriers and obstacles that faced the blind came tumbling down. Her boundless determination and her example of what a person with disabilities could accomplish helped change laws and create programs for people who were visually impaired

Helen touches the face  
of a wounded soldier at  
a hospital in North  
Carolina, 1945





Try naming [39 countries](#)—that's how many nations Helen and Polly visited! This world tour was funded largely by the American Foundation for the Overseas Blind (now called Helen Keller Worldwide). Everywhere she went, Helen was greeted by [throng](#)s of children, as well as famous personalities such as the British leader Winston Churchill and the Indian Premier Jawaharlal Nehru. Centers were established in her name in countries such as India, the Soviet Union, and Egypt

Helen visiting disabled,  
deaf, and blind children  
in post-war Rome, Italy,  
1946



After World War II, Helen and Polly went to Europe and Asia to show support for war veterans abroad. This film footage is from their 1948 trip to Japan. They visited Hiroshima and Nagasaki to experience firsthand the [aftermath of the only atomic bombs ever dropped](#)

Helen and Polly visiting  
Japan, 1948



Helen received incredible gifts on her travels around the globe—the Queen of Jordan once gave her a wooden box that was packed with candy! She also received this beautiful shield from Zulus in South Africa. In fact her entire house—which was called Arcan Ridge, in Westport, CT—was filled with gifts and souvenirs from her travels. Today those objects can be seen at the AFB headquarters in New York City.

Helen receiving a shield  
from Zulus, 1952



Helen's life has been the subject of movies, books, and plays for many decades. In 1955, Helen received an Academy Award for the documentary The Unconquered. In 1959, Anne Bancroft about her life, Helen Keller in Her Story (originally called Bancroft and Patty Duke starred in the Broadway play The Miracle Worker. The play, written by William Gibson, was based on Anne's earliest efforts to teach Helen how to communicate. Three years later, Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke starred in a movie version of the play. Both women won Academy Awards for their performances.

Helen holding her Oscar,  
1955





Helen loved all aspects of life, not just the political and social causes she fought for. She enjoyed good food and wine, and she appreciated beautiful things. Helen had very keen senses, including an extraordinary sense of touch. In the following video clip, she listens to the music by feeling the vibrations of the opera singer's lips and throat with her left hand. Helen's right hand moves in perfect time with the music.

Helen listening to an  
opera singer



Helen Keller with John F.  
Kennedy, 1961

When Helen was seven years old, she was introduced to President Grover Cleveland. Cleveland was just one of many presidents that Helen met in her lifetime. This picture shows her meeting President John F. Kennedy in 1961. She received letters from eight U.S. presidents—from Theodore Roosevelt in 1903 to Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965. Her fame resulted in many awards in her lifetime, including the French Legion of Honor and the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom.



Helen was a very spiritual woman. She believed that everyone from all races and cultures deserved the same rights. After Polly's death in 1961, Helen lived quietly at Arcan Ridge. She died in her sleep in 1968.

If you would like to learn more about Helen Keller's life, try the following books, as well as Helen's own writings

Helen Keller at 78 years  
old, 1959